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Country: Middle East

Subject: Comments on the Islamic Colloquium,
Princeton, 8-17 Sep 53.

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General Observations

1. The discussions throughout the eleven days of the Islamic Colloquium meetings were fairly free up to the point where the delegates thought that what they said might make trouble. The Turks felt free to criticize their own country's deficiencies, but the delegates from the Arab countries were the least open and frank. Somewhere between the two extremes came the delegates from India, Pakistan and Indonesia who were more open than the Arab delegates in their remarks. I don't know if this was in any way a reflection of their types of governments or whether it related to the proximity of the various countries to the USSR. The conference discussion was not of a completely frank nature.
2. The conference would have been better if there had been fewer topics. As it was, no topic was ever completed. In the eleven days they should, perhaps, have confined themselves to Muslim Law and Modern Law. The conference did accomplish the bringing together of Muslims from a wide area to talk and to discover the similarity of their problems. The delegates wanted further talk. A limited number of specific proposals came out, but there was a definite feeling that it was helpful to discuss problems in this way. The conference was a complete innovation. (What they were really discussing throughout it was Religion Versus Modernism.) A resolution was passed favoring working for the repetition of the colloquium idea in the future. It was good to have the meetings in the US.
3. Two UK delegates were sent by the Sheikh of Kuwait. They didn't talk, nor did they inhibit the discussions. There was no general attack on imperialism, but there were adverse references to the British and the French. A suggested resolution of protest re the lack of Muslim delegates from French Africa at the colloquium was dropped by general consent of the group, on the basis that such a resolution would have opened the way to a flood of politics. This was a conference planned by Americans, and avoided anything of a political nature. A number of Muslim delegates wanted to discuss Islam Versus Communism, but there was no time to give the topic adequate treatment. On the penultimate day of the conference, two Muslims spoke on the "problem of materialism among our young people."

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4. The intellectual calibre of the delegates was extremely high, and as such was not representative. The delegates were hand-picked on the basis of US invitation and the Muslim governments' agreement to send the people named by the US. A majority of those selected were Western-educated.
5. The three sheikhs at the conference (one from al-Azhar University, Cairo; one from Damascus; and one from Jerusalem) all agreed that change was present in the Muslim world, but they wished religious control to be decisive. Others emphasized the decisive nature of change, and hoped that it would be responsive to religion. The Modernists (except the Turks) considered themselves to be religious. With the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood's Said Ramadhan, whom I will discuss below [see paragraph 9], I was deeply impressed with the sincerity of everyone at the colloquium.
6. With regard to the question of a shortage of scientific and technical manpower in the Muslim nations, delegates from all countries said that such a shortage did exist in each of their countries. This was expressed by the three Turkish delegates and, at the other extreme, by the judge (khadif) from the Yemen. All would like more scientifically and technically trained personnel, and they all look to the West for help in general science, medicine and engineering; in Pakistan and India they look to the teaching of these subjects in English. Most of the discussion on this topic centered around the question: Is there a conflict between science and religion? No one thought that there should be a slowdown on scientific development, even if it did conflict with the established religion. The delegates were most receptive to the West in terms of science and technical assistance, and these areas are the best entrées of the US into the Muslim countries.
7. On the subject of changes contemplated in higher education which might increase or decrease each nation's scientific and technological capabilities, it must be said that the main problem is the nationalist problem, in terms of teachers, language of instruction and textbooks. Where a government imposes a national language for instruction this means the decline in the ability of the students to handle English when they get to the stage of highest education which must be taught in English now, e.g. in Egypt, Pakistan and India. (In October 1953 a conference was held in Alexandria, Egypt between the Minister of Education and the various universities on the subject of science and the teaching of science in the schools.) Nothing was said in specific terms at the colloquium on the subject of higher education and science and technology. It is my personal belief that it would be far better at this stage in the development of Islamic countries to stress such things as improved training for midwives and barbers as they are the group who are most concerned with public health and medicine.

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8. As for the matter of the influence of political and religious issues on scientific and educational activities in each of the nations represented, there was disagreement as to whether Islam formed a brake on scientific investigation and the scientific attitude. Some delegates said that Islam permits freedom of research and thought, whereupon one man rose and read a list of persons who had been persecuted for advocating Western scientific methods. This was denied by some others. It must be recognized that Islam does resist change. The delegates would deny that their governments brake scientific progress. The printed papers of the conference may present an overoptimistic picture.

Egypt

9. Said Ramadhan, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood leader and editor of its publication al Muslimun did attend the colloquium. (He gave an interesting interview which was published verbatim in the Middle East Report, 2 Oct 53, vol VI, No. 3, Middle East Institute, 2002 P Street NW, Washington 6, D.C.) Ramadhan was invited at the urging of the Egyptian Embassy. He was the most difficult element at the colloquium, as he was concerned with political pressure rather than with cultural problems. For example, he was asked at an evening gathering if it wouldn't be good for Muslim youth to engage enthusiastically in social work. His reply was: "The only thing Egyptian youth is interested in is in getting the British out." I felt that Ramadhan was a political reactionary, a Phalangist or Fascist type, rather than a religious reactionary as in the case of the three sheikhs who attended. The Egyptian speakers present, including Ambassador Ahmed Hussein, kept their eye on Ramadhan more than on any other person during their speeches. This made me wonder whether he was not a rather formal type of observer for the Muslim Brotherhood, interested only in observing the behavior and remarks of other Egyptians (a secret service type). When he spoke in public his remarks applied specifically and exclusively to Egypt; he did not discuss any external contacts. Ramadhan seems to be a Fascist, interested in the grouping of individuals for power. He did not display many ideas except those of the Brotherhood. He was present at a session where there was a lively discussion on intellectual change, modern literature, science, etc. He took no part and did not seem interested in academic matters.

Iraq

10. The only Iraqi delegate present was Jawad Ali. There were to have been two other delegates. Majid Khadduri doesn't count as an Iraqi, since he is a US resident. The presence of Jewish people at the conference made the Baghdad government reluctant to send delegates. No issues were discussed on the basis of Muslim sectarian differences; the Shias of Iraq and Iran never interposed any difference in attitude from the Sunnis. Differences in attitude toward such things as the status of women were presented on the basis of modernist versus traditionalist points of view, not on the basis of sectarian lines.

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